

The women of Athens

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Keeping it in the family

To our way of thinking, the conditions in which Athenian women lived seem oppressive and restrictive in the extreme. At a most basic and physical level, their lives were far more restricted than men's: the expectation was that they did not leave the space of the home – or only on specific, sanctioned occasions such as religious festivals. And Athenian homes themselves were organised in a way that was far more inverted and inward-looking than our own. Many European and north-American houses have a garden parallel with the neighbours', where a woman consigned to domesticity might at least chat across the fence while putting the washing. But the only open space attached to many Athenian houses was right in the centre of the house, like an internal courtyard, or at least within the high walls of the house compound itself.

And even within the house the space may have been separated between men and women: there is evidence both from texts and from archaeological remains that some houses had designated and specific 'female areas' and 'male areas'. Women, we may assume, would carry out their domestic duties and their leisure activities within the female quarters (which one text tells us were lockable – but only from the outside ...!). Where houses had male areas, they seem to have been closer to the outside. The 'outer' part, crucially, contained the threshold, the boundary between the home and the public world of politics, commerce and influence beyond it. The andron or men's room was the area of the home used for entertaining men from outside the house for dinner parties and symposia or drinking parties. Respectable women would never be present at such occasions, though women from outside the house (hired flutegirls and courtesans) might be. Such rigid physical and symbolic separation seems alien and problematic to a modern observer.

The power of speech

But this physical restriction is just one of the aspects of the way in which women in Athens found themselves at a disadvantage to men. Athens in the Classical period (the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.) was a world in which power was mediated through words. That is to say, power in Athens was represented and exercised through the licence to speak in particular situations, notably the assembly and the courts. The assembly was the meeting of all citizens (i.e. all free men over the age of 18 born of Athenian parents), which made all the major political decisions for the city: about, for instance, whether the city should go to war, whether public pay should be raised, whether the investment in the fleet should be continued or restricted. At least in theory, any citizen could speak and try to persuade his fellow citizens that they should follow the course of action he was proposing. In practice it was probably the wealthier, more educated citizens who monopolised the speaking – but even so, it was the mass of ordinary citizens who voted for or against a motion after someone had put it forward; so in this way, their voice was heard, their power was acknowledged.

The courts followed a similar model. Probably many of the cases that came to court, certainly most of the ones that we know much about, were the ones where the people involved came from the wealthier end of society. But the juries who decided the cases did not. These mass juries (sometimes containing as many as 6000 members) decided the fate of the speakers, decided who

should inherit, who should be exiled, who should have their citizenship taken away and lots of other major decisions radically affecting people's lives.

As you might anticipate, women had no place in all of this. Women could not be citizens in the same way that men could be (though certainly, in some contexts Athenian women were differentiated from non-Athenians); so they played no part in the decision-making process that was restricted to citizens. Even on matters that had a direct bearing upon their own lives, they had no voice that could be heard in the assembly. Likewise in the courts, women's words had no place. Women could not bring cases (their male guardians had to litigate on their behalf), they could not legally own property of any great value, they may have not even have been entitled (if that is the right word) to be prosecuted. If a woman's evidence was necessary, it was received in a special private hearing, guaranteed by an oath sworn in front of a civic magistrate, and then transmitted in writing to the court. From the speeches we have, it would transpire that this practice was hardly ever followed.

Bending the rules

The list of (what we would call) misogynies perpetrated against the women of Athens goes on and on; and there are many more examples of women's peculiar position in Athenian law and society. Rather than resorting to a catalogue, however, I want to change direction. The general picture as we have seen, suggests that the women of Athens certainly had a pretty hard time of it. But I should like now to look more carefully at that picture, and perhaps qualify it.

It is easy to conclude that the lives of Athenian women were unremittingly dreary, that the evidence shows a consistent and uniform pattern of oppression. In some ways that is exactly what our discussion so far has shown. And this is a true story – or, at least, all of the individual elements are true on their own terms. But it is only part of the truth. The evidence upon which such portraits of women's lives are based mostly derives from texts – texts written by men, circulating amongst men – giving ideals and expectations for how women's lives should be lived. The high-minded moralising presented by an orator in a court room provides good evidence for the idealised image of female behaviour, not for the practice of real women in actual social situations.

Let us pause to consider some of the rules and ideals in our society: no-one should drink alcohol before the age of 18, every child in this country should have equal access to an excellent standard of education, no published music should be taped without the permission of the releasing label ... There are many different forms of response to social rules and regulations, and even to rules that can be reinforced by the law. Such responses can be broadly reduced into three categories: obedience, rebellion or negotiation. Obedience: you agree and conform to the rules and expectations you are asked to live by. Rebellion: you flick two fingers at society and do it your own way, because you want to, or because you believe it to be morally superior. Negotiation: you do not openly challenge the rules and expectations, you may even openly conform to them, but you exploit the gaps and loopholes, circumvent the rules where you can, push them as far as they will go but still staying just within them.

We have a set of rules and expectations about women's lives

in Athens, but we have very little way of knowing for sure which of these three possible responses they met with. In recent years some scholars have focussed very much on the 'negotiation' model and have tried to show how women, although formally highly restricted in all the ways I have mentioned, still had informal power within the household and even, as a result, beyond it. In some law-court speeches, it is revealed that family councils have taken place in which women (especially older women) speak decisively, and attention is paid to their views. It is also arguable that women's management of the house, including domestic finances and the organisation of the manpower of the house (i.e. the slaves) shows that women had power within this domain, limited though it may have been. The normal pattern of Athenian family life, moreover, whereby boys are brought up by women, may suggest that a pattern of affection and respect between the sexes must have been built up.

These qualifications to our earlier portrait of 'powerless' women are important, and they must be set alongside it if we want a fuller view of the life of Athens' women. But the bottom line is that we will never know for sure: which of these two pictures you end up putting more weight on, how you balance them against each other, is ultimately going to depend upon your own view of what is important, and how the world works. Some have argued that the informal, 'negotiated' power is what mattered most, because it is this that determined how real, everyday life was lived. Others think that 'informal power' does not count at all, because it is only effective in very limited spheres and is always dependent upon another more powerful group who, ultimately, have the right to grant it and take it away. But just because there is no ultimate answer does not mean that the question is not worth asking. Think about your life, where you have choices, and where you do not, and what these freedoms and limitations feel like; then think about Athenian women again, ask yourself where the real power lies.

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For more on Athenian women see <http://www.stoa.org/diotima/>